

NOTES ON THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

* * * **ILLUSTRATION OF FORENSIC JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE** * * *

S.L.H.
Soli Deo Gloria!

"If thou count me, therefore, a partner, receive him as myself. If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account ... I will repay it." **Philemon 17-19**

AUTHOR: The Apostle Paul (c. 60-62 AD)

AUTHORSHIP AND DATE. Paul's letter to Philemon (v1) is one of his prison epistles (v1), written during his first imprisonment (i.e., house arrest) in Rome (cf. Act28:16,30). It would have been penned circa 60-62 AD.

WHO WAS PHILEMON? Everything known concerning Philemon comes from this epistle, as he is mentioned nowhere else in Scripture. He was a wealthy resident of Colosse (Cp., Col4:9) who had been converted under the ministry of the Apostle Paul (Philem19). His home served as the location for meetings of the church in Colosse (Philem2). He owned slaves, one of which was Onesimus.

SLAVERY IN THE BIBLE. The ubiquitous instances of slavery in the Bible are descriptive, not prescriptive; the Bible never condones the practice of slavery in any dispensation, although the Apostle Paul does give instructions to both masters and slaves during the Church Age (cf. Eph6:5-9). Within Hebrew culture during the Dispensation of Law (e.g., the nation of Israel under the Mosaic covenant), slavery was, in effect, indentured servitude that resulted from a debt that could not be paid; even then, it could last no longer than six years (Exod21:2). The Law of Moses categorically forbade kidnapping, human trafficking, and compelled servitude; in fact, these were capital crimes that warranted the death penalty (cf. Exod21:16; Deut24:7).

PURPOSE OF THE EPISTLE. Onesimus encountered Paul in Rome and was himself converted under Paul's ministry there. Paul sent Tychicus and Onesimus from Rome to Colosse (cf. Col4:7-9) carrying his epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon. The purpose of the epistle to Philemon was to intercede with Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, who had run away (and apparently stolen from) his master. Whereas Roman law allowed a runaway slave to be put to death, Paul appeals to Philemon for his forgiveness on the basis of grace; in doing so, the concept of double imputation in the doctrine of justification by grace is beautifully illustrated (e.g., Philem17-18).

OUTLINE OF PHILEMON.

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CHURCH TRADITION. The tradition of the Greek Orthodox (and Roman Catholic) Church holds that Philemon became bishop of the church of Colosse, Onesimus became bishop of the church of Ephesus (following Timothy), and that both were martyred by Nero. This tradition is embellished at best, and perhaps totally fictitious. While it is possible that Philemon was/became the bishop (i.e., pastor) of Colosse, but the timeline does not work for his and Onesimus' martyrdom under Nero, as Nero's death in 68 AD allows too little time for Onesimus' travel to Colosse with the epistle to Philemon (c. 62 AD), his release from servitude to Philemon, his ascendancy to the bishopric in Ephesus, and his eventual martyrdom by Nero before 68 AD. If elements of this tradition are true, perhaps his martyrdom occurred under Domitian, who reigned from 81-96 AD, and under whom the Apostle John was persecuted.

DISPENSATIONAL NOTE. The Epistle of Philemon illustrates the fundamental distinction in the doctrine of justification during the Dispensation of Law in contrast to Grace (Cp., Jn1:17). Under the Law, personal righteousness was required (Matt5:20,48), whereas under Grace the imputed righteousness of a qualified and perfect Substitute is accepted (Jn3:16). Although vicarious substitution was pictured (imperfectly) in the animal sacrifices of the Mosaic covenant, they were not efficacious (Heb10:4); vicarious substitution was realized only by means of the life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Col2:14-17; Heb10:10).

CHAPTER 1

SALUTATION

Paul's epistles¹ follow the common format of the 1st century Greco-Roman world. The opening always began with three elements: 1) the name of the writer, 2) the name of the recipient, and 3) a formal greeting.

- [1] The epistle begins with the name of its author, "Paul". Paul describes himself as "a prisoner of Jesus Christ", indicating two important details: 1) the letter was written during his imprisonment in Rome (cf. Act28:16,30), and 2) the cause of his imprisonment was his ministry on behalf of "Jesus Christ" (Act28:17-20; Cp., Matt5:10-12; 1Pet4:14-16). The recipient's name, "Philemon", means *kindly* or *affectionate*; he is "loved" by Paul, who considers him a "fellowlabourer" (Greek, *συνεργός*; thus, Philemon is not only a believer, but active in ministry for Christ).
- [2] "Apphia" is a feminine name, generally assumed to be the wife of Philemon. "Archippus" is variously assumed to be either Philemon's son, the pastor of the church in Colosse (cf. Col4:17), or perhaps both; he is described as a "fellowsoldier" in ministry for Christ, seemingly more intense than "fellowlabourer" (v1). The fact that Paul also addressed the epistle "to the church in thy house" indicates it is more than a mere personal letter, it was intended to be read by the entire assembly of believers in Colosse.
- [3] "Grace" and "peace" (in that order) are Paul's standard greeting. "Peace" is the equivalent of the Hebrew *shalom*, which is made possible by the gospel of "grace" (Rom5:1). Note that "grace" is extended to "you" (plural; i.e., the entire "church"; v2).

COMMENTS ON THE CHARACTER OF PHILEMON

- [4] Here, "thee" is singular, so it is Philemon in particular for whom Paul gives thanks to God.
- [5] Again, "thy" and "thou" are singular, so the subject is Philemon, who was so renowned for his "love" and "faith", both "toward the Lord Jesus" and "all saints", that Paul had "hear[d]" of it even in Rome.
- [6] Here, "communication" (Greek, *κοινωνία*) means *fellowship* or *sharing*, the idea being that Philemon was active in sharing his "faith" (i.e., the gospel) and attributing "every good thing which is in you" to "Christ Jesus". Note, "you" is a 2nd person plural pronoun, so its antecedent is all the addressees of the epistle (vv1-2), including "the church" (v2).
- [7] By addressing Philemon as "brother", Paul explicitly recognizes Philemon as a believer. In Hebrew culture, "bowels" are used to designate the passions seated in the innermost man (translated as "inward affection"; 2Cor7:15), as heart is so used in Greek/western culture. Thus, the "love" of Philemon "refreshed" the innermost

¹ The exception to this pattern is the Epistle to the Hebrews, which was addressed to Jewish, rather than Gentile, recipients. In addition, Paul's name carried a unique apostolic authority with the Gentiles (cf. Rom11:13; 15:16; Gal2:7-9).

needs of "the saints", including both their physical and spiritual needs.

- [8] Paul suggests he has the authority as an apostle to "enjoin" (i.e., demand, command) Philemon to do "that which is convenient" (i.e., proper, appropriate), by which he presumably meant for Philemon to be gracious to Onesimus; but **grace**, by definition, **cannot be compelled**.

PAUL'S INTERCESSION FOR ONESIMUS

- [9] "Yet", rather than compel Philemon against his will, Paul "beseech[es]" him, where "beseech" is a gracious appeal (i.e., non-compulsory). Rather than assert his authority as an apostle, he offers his appeal as "Paul the aged" (i.e., an elder due respect offering advice/wisdom to a younger man; cf. 1Tim5:17) and "a prisoner of Jesus Christ" (i.e., one who has suffered much in the cause of Christ).
- [10] Paul refers to Onesimus as "my son" (Cp., 1Tim1:2) "whom I have begotten in my bonds", suggesting that Paul personally led Onesimus to Christ while in prison.
- [11] The name "Onesimus" means **profitable** or useful, so Paul makes use of a pun. As an unbeliever Onesimus had been "unprofitable" to Philemon, but as a believer he had become "profitable" to Paul.
- [12] Paul had sent Onesimus back to Philemon (Cp., Col4:8-9) with a request that he be received graciously by Philemon as Paul's "own bowels" (i.e., as one most dear to the Apostle Paul).
- [13] Paul would have preferred to "retain" Onesimus with him in Rome in order to minister to his considerable needs in prison, "in [Philemon's] stead"; there is a very subtle implication that Philemon has personally failed to minister to the needs of Paul.
- [14] Philemon is not obligated to extend grace to Onesimus (indeed, under Roman law Onesimus deserved to be executed). Note that Paul's appeal to Philemon is "not ... of necessity, but willingly"; thus, the principle of grace in contradistinction to law is illustrated (Cp., 2Cor9:7; cf. 1Cor6:12; 10:23).
- [15] Paul suggests that "perhaps" what was undertaken with evil intent on the part of Onesimus will be used for good by God (Cp., Gen50:20; Rom8:28); though Onesimus "departed for a season", he will return "forever".
- [16] Onesimus would return to Philemon as "a beloved brother" (i.e., a believer), whose future service to Philemon will be "as to the Lord" (cf. Col3:22-24). Note the contrast between "season" and "forever", or temporal versus eternal. That Paul suggests Onesimus would be "above a servant" might be an allusion to the role of a **bondservant** under the Law of Moses in which, for love of his master, a servant choose to *willingly* serve his master "forever" (cf. Exod21:2-6); such a servant was highly valued and his service exceptional in nature, as it was motivated by love rather than compulsion (i.e., grace rather than law). Paul referred to himself as a "**bondservant** of Jesus Christ" (cf. Rom1:1; Philip1:1; Tit1:1).

- [17] Note, "count" implies a legal reckoning, as in justification (Cp., Rom3:24-28). Onesimus is not Paul, but Philemon is to "receive him" as if he were; this is an illustration of the substitution of the righteous for the unrighteous as was typified in all the animal sacrifices and effectually realized in the sacrifice of Christ (cf. Heb10:1,10). Paul refers to himself as a "partner" (Greek, *κοινωνός*) with Philemon, consistent with "fellowlabourer" (v1).
- [18] Onesimus had "wronged" Philemon by running away, and the clause to "oweth thee ought" may suggest he had also stolen from Philemon; all of this debt was to be transferred to Paul's "account" (again, legal reckoning; Cp., v17).
- [19] Philemon "owest" Paul "even [his] own self", in the sense that he was led to the Lord for salvation by the ministry of Paul, and Paul might have asked for his debt to be forgiven on that basis. Nevertheless, Paul commits to "repay it", an illustration of a substitute who fully satisfies the debt owed by another. Note that Paul normally employed an amanuensis in the writing of his letters, the exceptions being the complete epistles to Philemon and Galatians (Gal6:11) and the "token in every epistle" used for authentication (2Thess3:17).

Typology of Double Imputation in Justification. The concept of double imputation is fundamental to the N.T. doctrine of justification (cf. Rom3:24-26). In double imputation (cf. 2Cor5:19-21), the believer's sins are imputed to Christ, who paid his sin debt in full at the cross (cf. Jn19:30; 1Jn2:2), and the perfect human righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer (cf. Matt5:48; Rom5:10). This is illustrated beautifully in the typological relationships between Paul (as a type of Christ), Philemon (as a type of God), and Onesimus (as a type of the believer); the debt Onesimus owed, which he could not pay, was charged to Paul's account (v18) who was responsible for satisfying the debt in full (v19), and Philemon was to receive Onesimus as if he were the Apostle Paul (v17).

- [20] Philemon's acceptance of Paul as a substitute for the sins of Onesimus would bring him "joy" and "refresh [his] bowels"² (i.e., the inner, spiritual man).
- [21] Based on his knowledge of the character of Philemon, Paul has "confidence" his appeal will be favorably received, even "knowing" that Philemon will "also do more than I say" (i.e., perhaps Philemon will free Onesimus from his servitude, or forgive Paul's vicarious debt, although the extent of Paul's request had stopped short of potential outcomes; Cp., 1Cor6:7; Eph4:32).

BENEDICTION

- [22] Paul was apparently accustomed to "lodging" in the home of Philemon when he was in Colosse, an indication of the intimacy of their relationship. Paul suggests that Philemon has been praying for his release from prison, and he hopes those prayers will be effectual.

² This Hebraism might be expressed in Greek/western idiom as "bless my heart".

- [23] "Epaphras" is highly commended as one having "great zeal" in prayer for those at Colosse (Col4:12-13).
- [24] "Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, and Lucas" are all mentioned in the closing of Paul's epistle to Colosse (Col4:10,14), which suggests that the "church" that met in Philemon's "house" (v2) was the assembly at Colosse. Note that "Marcus" and "Lucas" are the Latinized forms of Mark and Luke (Cp., 2Tim4:11).
- [25] Paul always ended his epistles by commending his readers to the grace of God. No one understood the grace of God more than the Apostle Paul, who had benefited so immensely from it (cf. 1Cor15:9-10; 1Tim1:12-15; note the principle in Luk7:47). Note the plural pronoun "you", which indicates Paul's benediction was intended for all the recipients of the letter, including the whole "church" at Colosse (v2), not merely Philemon; the singular "spirit" implies the Christian unity manifested in their local assembly.

--- S.D.G. ---

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